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ABSTRACT

There is an evolving paradigm shift in the field of rural education away from emulating urban schools and toward a pedagogy of place. This shift is influenced by the following trends: 1) the rediscovery of the unique features of rural and small schools as strengths to be nurtured, not problems to be solved; 2) the recognition that centralized, large-scale organizational models resulting from a century of global industrial expansion and resource extraction have been inappropriate for rural contexts, and the environmental sensitivity and new appreciation for rural places that has grown in response to these often destructive models; 3) the acknowledgment of the role of teachers as gatekeepers of change within classrooms, the centrality of rural schools within their communities, and the many distinctive features of revitalized rural schools as essential elements of educational reform; 4) the redesign of teacher education to prepare teachers for restructured rural schools; 5) the connection of the classroom with the community through service learning and environmental education programs based on study and stewardship of local ecosystems; 6) the use of new information technologies for developing teacher networks that combat rural teacher isolation; 7) increased efforts to raise levels of sensitivity and tolerance among rural students toward racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity; 8) the use of rural films and literature as source materials for a rural curriculum; and 9) rural teachers as producers of curricula that are appropriate to their needs and contexts. (TD)

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Toward a Pedagogy of Place:
Finding Common Ground for Rural Researchers, Teacher Educators, and Practitioners

Roundtable notes prepared for the
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Toward a Pedagogy of Place: Finding Common Ground for Rural Researchers, Teacher Educators, and Practitioners

by David Leo-Nyquist & Paul Theobald

"My feeling is that if improvement is going to begin anywhere, it will have to begin out in the country and in the country towns. This is not because of any intrinsic virtue that can be ascribed to rural people, but because of their circumstances. Rural people are living, and have lived for a long time, at the site of the trouble. They see all around them, every day, the marks and scars of an exploitive national economy. They have much reason, by now, to know how little real help is to be expected from somewhere else. They still have, moreover, the remnants of local memory and local community. And in rural communities there are still farms and small businesses that can be changed according to the will and desire of individual people."

--Wendell Berry

"Focusing on place, using the community as a curricular lens, not only contributes to re-creating the community, but it will also help realize true school renewal."

–Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995

For nearly eight years the authors have been involved in a dialogue about the relation between theory and practice in rural schools. Combining our perspectives and interests as teachers, educational researchers, historians, and teacher educators, we have collaborated in a national journal for rural school practitioners (Country Teacher), actively participated in the leading organizational forum for rural educators (NREA), and been players in an evolving paradigm shift within the field of rural education.

This shift has been marked by renewed attention to the important of place in thinking about rural schools and rural teachers. As one of us has written recently, "The work of the rural school is no longer to emulate the urban or suburban school, but to attend to its own place" (Theobald & Nachtigal). Jonathan Sher (1995) has described "the collection of nontraditional rural schools and rural reformers" whose work during the last 20 years has inspired our own thinking, and which is now being supported by the Annenberg Rural Challenge to serve as the catalyst for a rural school reform *movement* across the country. Our interests lie in support of such a movement.

Our current work marks our attempt to integrate our understandings of a convergence of trends within rural communities, rural education, and the school reform movement. We invite to our Roundtable all those who view the near-future as a time of extraordinary promise and possibility for those concerned with rural schools. Our thoughts are organized around the idea of a "pedagogy of place," with attention given to the following areas:

1. The Rediscovery of Purpose for Rural Schools

For most of this century, rural schools have been treated as a national "problem" that could best be solved by making them more like efficiently-managed large urban schools. From this perspective, the unique features of rural schools and communities are seen as liabilities to be overcome, rather than as potential strengths to be nurtured. However, in the last 15 years there has been a growing awareness that small schools are capable of providing high-quality educational opportunities for rural communities. An important part of this process of acceptance has been the identification and clarification of the special strengths and advantages of small rural schools. A body of literature has emerged that imagines new possibilities and new visions for rural schools. It focuses more on what could be than on what is. It confronts the popular stereotype that characterizes small communities and small schools as inherently democratic (small scale=highly participatory) and compares rural realities with this rural myth. What are the defining characteristics of this vision, and how can this vision be used to bring about needed changes within rural schools? How can rural schools be organized to maximize their capacity to foster democratic values as students learn about active citizenship? How can these schools learn to use these "advantages of scale" to best serve their students and their communities?

2. The Global Context for Rural History and the Recovery of a Sense of Place *The history of Rural America and its rural schools is part of a much larger global dynamic that has transformed rural populations and rural places. Within the United States, a century-long process of industrial expansion and resource extraction has threatened the stability and integrity of rural communities and ecosystems. In the process, large-scale bigger-is-better industrial models that evolved as appropriate to urban settings were often inappropriately--and indiscriminately--applied to rural contexts. These applications not only affected American agriculture and various resource extraction industries, but they also changed the face of most rural schools.*

However, beneath the surface of the mainstream tendencies within American culture for centralization and large-scale organizational structures, a vital decentralist counter-tradition, fed by many sources, has survived. In the 1960s and 70s this counter-tradition began to be popularized by a number of powerful writers and social critics, providing a needed level of legitimacy for small-scale experiments and alternatives to the dominant model of "bigger is better." In addition, a growing awareness of the destructive potential of the industrial/extractive trend yielded an environmental sensitivity that includes a newfound appreciation for rural places. This trend has reinforced the commitment of many long-time rural residents to protect and sustain their communities, and has made it more attractive--and possible--for growing numbers of urban/suburban dwellers to relocate to rural places.

3. Country Teachers, Rural Schools and the Educational Reform Movement

In the last decade, teachers have begun to emerge as autonomous voices within the educational reform movement. Earlier reform efforts tended to ignore or bypass teachers in their critical role as "gatekeepers" for change within their own classrooms and schools. Acknowledging the centrality of rural schools within their communities and of teachers as both the linchpin and catalyst for ongoing school improvements

sets the stage for a discussion of the special role of rural teachers within revitalized rural schools and communities. For the most part, however, the existing literature on rural education and rural schools is not a part of the emerging literature of the educational reform movement. Yet many distinctive features of rural schools are essential elements of "restructured" schools, and a number of well-documented "model schools" are situated in rural contexts. In addition, there is a strong emphasis within the school reform literature on the importance of small schools (or "schools within schools"), local context and place, and community. How can revitalized rural schools be brought into the mainstream of educational reform as equal participants? How can the Annenberg Rural Challenge support rural schools in this effort?

4. Redesigning Teacher Education for Restructured Rural Schools

Many existing teacher ed programs prepare students to be urban teachers. What would be the distinctive features of a program that prepares rural teachers? What current examples are there of successful programs? How can prospective rural teachers be prepared to function as generalists and as community leaders? To what extent would such training be useful for most new teachers, not just for rural teachers? What trends within the professional development school (PDS) movement and literature suggest a framework for a "rural PDS" that would serve the special needs of rural schools and communities and contribute to the construction of a "pedagogy of place"?

5. Connecting the Classroom with the Community

Because of the centrality of schools within most rural communities, rural schools have the potential to function as both catalyst and role model for addressing a wide range of community needs and options for the future. Much useful work of this kind, which includes school-based businesses and entrepreneurial training, has already been done. What lessons have been learned from this work, what models have proven most useful, and what are the areas of controversy surrounding this activity? Another important example of this kind of work is "Foxfire," which for more than 30 years--with strong rural roots in northeastern Georgia--has been an innovative educational approach for connecting the classroom with the larger community, energizing teachers and students around the country. Coupled with an overlapping recent national interest in community service and "service learning" for students, Foxfire provides rich resources for rural teachers as they rethink (or prepare for) their roles within their communities. Still another thriving school/community connection in many rural areas is a more hands-on approach to environmental education, based on intense study of local ecosystems and fostering a strong sense of stewardship for the wise use of local natural resources.

6. Teacher Networks & New Technologies for Rural Schools

Teacher isolation is a common problem in most schools, regardless of location, and the geographic isolation of many rural schools only compounds the problem. What do we know about teacher networks, community-building in schools, and new information technologies that has special relevance for ending the isolation of rural teachers? What existing resources and opportunities can be adapted for use in rural settings?

7. Rural Multiculturalism

The population mix of many rural communities is generally less representative of the rich diversity of American society--racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, etc.--than its urban counterpart. This fact has often complicated rural attempts to raise the levels of sensitivity and tolerance among students toward those who are "different," which have often lagged behind similar projects in urban areas. The state of Alaska has made it a priority in the last 20 years to address these issues within its public schools, teacher education and professional development programs. A close examination of these and other, related efforts elsewhere can yield important insights and strategies adaptable to a wide variety of other rural settings.

8. Rural Films and Rural Literature: Source Materials for a Rural Curriculum

Dozens of Hollywood- and independently-produced films thoughtfully depict the realities and dynamics of rural life and small communities. A growing body of regional literatures--as well as children's literature and young-adult fiction-- gives expression to the rich variety of rural places and rural "voices" within our national history. Appropriately used, these artistic creations can serve as powerful "texts" within a place-specific curriculum generated by rural teachers, and assist students in their quest for self-awareness and an understanding of their place within the larger human community. This chapter will suggest ways of using such materials in rural classrooms.

9. Constructing a Pedagogy of Place: Rural Teachers as Curriculum-Makers

As teachers have stepped forward as key players within both national and local strategies for school reform, they have also begun to challenge the authority of prepackaged, commercially-produced materials (textbooks, workbooks, assessment tools, etc.) to drive the classroom curriculum. They have become the producers and creators--instead of simply the consumers--of curriculum materials and approaches that are appropriate to their own needs and contexts. A number of rural teachers have created "place-specific" materials and curricula and used them successfully in their classrooms. What does a "rural curriculum" look like, and how can rural teachers , teacher educators, and educational researchers participate in its creation? A variety of teacher-produced K-12 materials will be examined and shared, and a number of experienced rural "curriculum-makers" will discuss (through interviews) the general process and design principles that guide their creation of a place-specific curriculum.

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